



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE JOURNAL OF NEGRO HISTORY

VOL. IV—OCTOBER, 1919—No. 4

LABOR CONDITIONS IN JAMAICA PRIOR TO 1917

To show the lack of progress in Jamaica since the abolition of slavery by the gradual process inaugurated in 1833 and its final extermination in 1838, nothing will better serve the purpose than the review of the system of apprenticeship established as a substitute for that institution. According to the portraiture given by Sturge and Harvey in their work entitled *The West Indies in 1837* and the conditions now obtaining in the island, very little progress in the condition of the laboring man has been made since that time.

For scarcely any remuneration the Negroes were required by a compulsory arrangement between their overseers and the Special Magistrates to give during the crop the time granted them under the law for their own use and they were on many estates obliged to work a greater number of hours than was required by law. The apprentices were compelled to work by spells of eight hours in the field on one day, and for sixteen hours in and about the boiling house on the next day, giving up their half Friday, for which amount of extra labor they received two shillings and one penny or 50 cents a week. On one estate the wages paid for extra labor during crop was two pence or 4 cents an hour. The working hours were generally from four to eleven and from one to five, and it is interesting to note that

while it was expected that on each half Friday given to the apprentices, sufficient food should be provided by them to last for the succeeding week, yet when that half day was taken from them five or six herrings were the only compensation.

The following case is taken from an agreement made in 1836 by certain cane hole diggers. Every laborer agreed to dig 405 cane holes in four and one half days due his master, and to receive ten pounds of salt fish and a daily allowance of sugar and rum, the salt fish to be diminished in the ratio of one pound for every forty holes short of 405. In the one day and a half of his own time he was paid three shillings and four pence or 80 cents for every ninety cane holes. Under this agreement the maximum work performed was that of an apprentice who in three weeks of thirteen and one half days dug in his own time 1,017 holes, for which he received 28 pounds of fish, and in cash one pound and fifteen shillings or \$8.40. By this means it was possible for the master to have 58 acres of land worked at a total cost of £147 10s 0d or \$708. The cost to him, if the work had been given out to jobbers, would have been £8 an acre or £464, \$2,227.20. His apprentices were therefore the means of saving for him the sum of £316 10d or \$1,519.20.

The following was the scale of wages for transient labor:

Prime headman	3	pence	or	6	cents.
Inferior headman	2	pence	or	4	cents.
First gang—able-bodied	1½	pence	or	3	cents.
First gang—weakly	1¼	pence	or	2½	cents.
Second gang—able-bodied	1¼	pence	or	2½	cents.
Second gang—weakly	1	penny	or	2	cents.
Third gang—active	¾	penny	or	1½	cents.
Third gang—lazy	½	penny	or	1	cent.

The apprentices were permitted under the law to make application to be valued, and on the basis of the valuation were entitled to purchase their freedom. Here again was the system grossly abused. The slaves or apprentices, as they were at that time called, became at the hour of valuation very desirable assets; and, in many instances, so val-

uable did they suddenly become that it was quite out of their power to carry out their intention. The system became for this reason a premium on all the bad qualities of the Negroes and a tax upon all the good. In spite of this, however, so great was the desire for freedom that within a period of twenty-eight months, from 1st August, 1834, to 30th November, 1836, 1,580 apprentices purchased their freedom by valuation at a cost of £52,215 or \$250,632, an average of £33 or \$158.40 a head.

Although seventy-eight years have passed since the total abolition of slavery, however, the condition of the laborers of Jamaica remains practically the same as it was then. There has been beyond doubt much improvement in the island, but the unfortunate fact is this, that the laborer living in a country much improved in many respects, is himself no better or very little better off than his forefathers in slavery. In truth, he is still an economic slave. The conditions under which he lives and works are such as destroy whatever ambition he may possess, and reduce his life to a mere drudgery, to a mere animal existence.

Some progress has been made and there are signs of improvement, but the majority of laborers, the men and women and children who till the banana fields and work on the sugar plantations, are no better off than previously. These are still beasts of burden, still the victims of an economic system under which they labor not as human beings with bodies to be fed or clothed, with minds to be cultivated and aspiring souls to be ministered unto, but as living machines designed only to plant so many banana suckers in an hour, or to carry so many loads of canes in a day. After seventy-eight years in this fair island, side by side, with the progress and improvements above referred to, there are still hundreds and hundreds of men and women who live like savages in unfloored huts, huddled together like beasts of the field, without regard to health or comfort. And they live thus, not because they are worthless or because they are wholly without ambition or desire to live otherwise, but

because they must thus continue as economic slaves receiving still the miserable pittance of a wage of eighteen pence or 36 cents a day that was paid to their forefathers at the dawn of emancipation. The system is now so well established that the employers apparently regard it as their sacred right and privilege to exploit the laborers, and the laborers themselves have been led by long submission and faulty teaching to believe that the system is a part of the natural order, a result of divine ordainment.

This attitude of the poor down-trodden laborers is one of the most effective blocks in the way of his improvement. But the despair of every one who dares to tackle this problem of improving the economic and therefore the social and moral condition of the laborers of this island is based on the inertness which almost amounts to callous indifference of the local Government.

The following letters addressed to me by the Colonial Secretary of Jamaica deserves to be put on record as evidence of the mind of the government, in 1913,—of its inability or unwillingness to take the first step. Letter A was written at the direction of Sir Sydney Olivier, K.C.M.G., then Governor of Jamaica, who recently expressed the opinion that the laborers in this island should receive one dollar a day. That letter is valuable in that it is an official statement of the maximum wages paid by the government of Jamaica to its own laborers. Letter B was written at the direction of the then Colonial Secretary, Mr. P. Cork, and is even more valuable as an official pronouncement on the important question of a living wage.

LETTER A.

“17th January, 1913.

“No. $\text{T}5\frac{7}{5}\frac{3}{5}\frac{7}{8}$

“With reference to the letter from this office No. $\frac{13000}{15568}$ dated the 6th November last and to previous correspondence in connection with your suggestion that the Government should raise the wages of their laborers, I am directed by the Governor to inform you that it appears from enquiries made by His Excellency's direc-

tion that the average wage now earned by laborers under the Public Works Department is approximately one shilling and eight pence half penny (41 cents) for an average day of ten hours, so that in an average day of ten hours the laborers would at the same rate of pay earn two shillings and one penny half penny" (51 cents).

LETTER B.

"8th March, 1913.

"No. $\frac{2926}{3266}$

"The Acting Governor directs me to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 26th ultimo on the subject of the amount of wages paid to native laborers in the employment of the Government, and in reply to say that no acknowledgement of the correctness of your contention that one shilling and sixpence per diem is not a fair living wage for any laborer to receive, and that the minimum he ought reasonably to expect to enable him to meet the ordinary demands of existence is two shillings per diem (48 cents), is to be inferred from the letter from this office, No. $\frac{727}{1533}$ dated the 17th of January, 1913.

"2. I am to add that His Excellency is not in a position to comply with your request that steps should be taken to ensure to all laborers working under the Public Works Department a minimum wage of two shillings per diem (48 cents) as from 1st April next."

The problem becomes real and serious when the ruling authorities are unwilling to admit what is absolutely clear to every one who is not hopelessly prejudiced, namely, that eighteen pence or thirty-six cents a day, the amount which was paid to the emancipated slaves in 1838, is not a living wage for his descendants in the year 1913, and when they are either unable or unwilling to set the pace for other employers of labor by paying their own laborers a minimum wage of two shillings or forty-eight cents a day.

With the labor problem of Jamaica the question of East Indian Immigration is intimately connected. While, on the one hand, we have the able-bodied native laborers miserably and cruelly underpaid, and having in consequence to emigrate in large numbers to other countries, on the other

hand, we have the importation into the island of indentured immigrants under the conditions which make the economic improvement of the native laborers an impossibility. On the one side, the available records inform us that from April 1, 1905, to March 31, 1908, laborers numbering 39,060 emigrated from this island and deposited with the local Government the sum of £22,217 or \$106,641.60 as required by law. The exodus to Cuba is at present a very serious comment upon the existing labor conditions. During the month of December, 1916, 761 persons emigrated from the island, 580 to Cuba and 181 to other places.

The figures, on the other side, reveal the fact that since the introduction of East Indian Immigration in 1845 to the present time 35,933 East Indians have been brought into the island; and it is estimated that there are to-day resident in the island over 20,000 East Indians, 3,000 of whom are indentured and 17,000 have completed their term of indenture. These immigrants are distributed to the several estates by the government at a cost of £20.10.0, or \$90.42, paid in installments: £2 or \$9.60, paid on allotment, £2.2.0 or \$10.08 at the end of the first year, and £4.2.0 or \$19.68 at the end of each of the succeeding four years.

For the years 1891-1908 the cost of this system to the colony is officially reported as follows:

Cost of importation	£129,692.2.2	\$622,522.12
Administrative expenses	£ 37,377.0.2	179,409.64
Return passages 1901-8	£ 27,254.5.11	130,820.62
Gross cost	£194,323.83	£932,752.38
Receipts in hand	£143,171.1.1	\$687,221.06
Net cost to colony	£ 51,152.7.2	\$245,531.32

or an average of over £3,000 or \$14,400 per annum.

The immigrants are indentured for five years, and are entitled after a continuous residence of ten years in the colony to one half of the value of their passage money in the case of men and of one third in the case of women. For a working day of nine hours the men are paid one shilling or 24 cents and the women nine pence or 18 cents. A deduc-

tion of two shillings and sixpence or 60 cents a week is made for rations supplied. They receive free hospital treatment which cost the Government on the average of two pounds or \$9.60 each per annum.

The system of immigration is a factor contributing to the present unsatisfactory condition of the labor market in this island. The immigrants are unfair competitors of the natives. They accept lower wages, and they lower the standard of life. They are practically modern slaves. It is not then reasonable with such competitors for the native laborer to expect a favorable response to his appeal for fairer treatment. It is asserted that the importation of East Indians is necessary because the native laborers will not give that reliable and continuous service which is necessary for the profitable working of the estates. The answer to this is that these same laborers emigrate and give their foreign employers the reliable and continuous service which they consistently withhold from the employer at home because they are paid more and treated better abroad.

The solution of the problem in so far as the first steps are concerned is then two fold. First, the government must at once determine that this systematic immigration of cheap labor must cease, and must set about without delay to make the necessary arrangements and adjustments which will be preparatory to an early discontinuance of the system. Next, the employers of labor must either by persuasion or legal coercion be led to induce the native laborers by the offer of better wages to remain at home.

With reference to the first it has been discovered that the government supports the fiction that the importation of East Indians is necessary. In a report dated October 1, 1908, the Acting Protector of Immigrants, with the apparent approval of the Governor, wrote: "As a result of having a nucleus of reliable labor in the shape of indentured coolies owners of estates have felt themselves justified in spending large sums of money in extending their cultivations, and in installing expensive machinery. This has had

the effect of providing employment for a much larger number of creole laborers than formerly, and of putting a great deal more money in circulation. I think that instead of the coolie being cursed by the native laborer for taking away his work he should be blessed for having been the means of providing employment for him."

The substance of the statement given above is incorporated by Sir Sydney Olivier, K.C.M.G., in a chapter of his book entitled *White Capital and Colored Labor*, in which there occurs this remarkable assertion: "In Jamaica wages are higher in those districts where indentured coolies are employed on banana plantations." Coolies who receive a maximum wage of one shilling or 24 cents a day are introduced to the world as the wage-raising factor in Jamaica!

Just prior to the World War the labor question was a very live one in Jamaica. The weekly exodus of hundreds of laborers to the neighboring island of Cuba, the murmuring of dissatisfaction among the immigrants, friction in the working of the Immigration Department,—all have served to bring this labor problem prominently to public notice. At a meeting held in the interest of the sugar industry in January, 1917, there was adopted a suggestive resolution moved by Mr. A. W. Farquharson, a prominent and successful legal practitioner, and a man who, though the descendant of an old family of planters, is deeply interested in the improvement of the laborers. The resolution was: "That this committee is convinced that the continuous and increasing exodus of laborers from the colony to seek work in foreign countries is impeding the development of the resources of the island, and that it is of urgent importance that early measures should be adopted to arrest such exodus, by the creation of conditions which will induce an improvement in the status of the laboring population."

The *Daily Chronicle* of that date comments thus on the question:

“The Sugar Committee has pointed out clearly the precise measures that are certain to produce better remuneration for the laborer, and this, as we have been insisting from the start, is the very essence of the scheme. According to the recommendations forwarded to the Government and turned down by the Privy Council—some of whose members have evidently made up their minds that something akin to the feudal system must, in the interest of a few, be forever maintained in Jamaica—the Government would go into the business for the protection of the community against the avidity of the private capitalist; in other words, to insure a fair distribution in this island, of the profits derived from the rehabilitated industry. Under this arrangement the Government factories would be in a position to set the pace in the matter of payment of wages to the laborer. Think of what this would mean! A higher standard of living, better health, more happiness—the very things which the peasant is being forced to go abroad to obtain. But the mandamus will have none of this socialism; it is too broad, too comprehensive, too human for minds unaccustomed to look beyond self. So they have rejected the Sugar Committee’s proposals, compelling Mr. Farquharson and his friends to appeal to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. His Excellency the Governor and his advisors have thus shown their utter inability to understand the economic needs of the island. Deliberately—we do not say with malice aforethought—have they decided to perpetuate conditions which in the past have served to disintegrate the population of this colony, and will in the future continue to do this with even more harmful effects than hitherto unless some well-considered attempt is made to produce more wealth from our soil for the benefit, not of a few capitalists, but of the nine hundred thousand inhabitants of Jamaica.”

One might not wholly endorse this criticism, but it should be represented that the inaction of the government, whether due to inability or indifference or to whatever cause, has been the prime preventing cause of an earlier solution of a long standing problem. It seemed, however, as if an attempt was at last to be made to do something. A news article in *The Daily Gleaner*, February, 1917, announced that the Government had at last realized the urgent need of improved barrack accommodation on the estates, and of

proper medical supervision of the laborers. It desired to stem the exodus of laborers, but from its own statement given out to the press in the article referred to, not so much for the benefit of the ill-paid laborers, but in consideration for the employers who would soon have to face a labor market relieved of imported coolies. And so, for the sake of the employers, it was proposed to ask the native laborer to agree to be indentured for twelve months at the same miserable wages of eighteen pence or 36 cents a day, with the addition of a tempting (?) bonus of two pounds or \$9.60 at the end of the term. And this paternal suggestion was made in order "to improve the local sources of labor supply that were available" at a time when Cuba was offering from one dollar to one dollar and a half a day!

The Labor Problem of Jamaica may then be briefly stated thus: After seventy-eight years of freedom the laboring population was economically no better off in 1916 than their forefathers who lived in the early days of emancipation. The laborers received a daily wage which was but a small pittance, and they worked under conditions that were appalling, and that were a disgrace to any community pretending to be civilized. The government instead of taking steps to improve these conditions and thus to induce the laborer to give in Jamaica that reliable and continuous service which hundreds so willingly and efficiently gave abroad, promoted the perpetuation of those conditions by spending each year over £3,000 or \$14,400 of the taxpayers' money in establishing and maintaining a system of immigration which demoralized the best labor market by providing the employers with an undesirable class of laborers whose standard of life is abnormally low, and to whom twenty-four cents a day is a considerable sum, and thereby compelled the native laborer either to accept the unsatisfactory conditions or to emigrate.

The following extract from an article entitled, "What Feeding Him Means," which appeared in *The Daily Gleaner* of February 7, 1917, throws more light on the problem:

“Captain Fist tells us that what the peasant needs to make him a better worker is better feeding. He also suggests that decent dwelling places should be put up on the estates and plantations for the people, and that a small lot of land should be allowed each family for the cultivation of ground provisions. All this and more is being done for the Jamaican in Panama. But when we hear of living places here, it is always ‘barracks’ that are spoken of,—a long range of wretched structures where comfort and privacy are out of the question, and where, as a rule, only single men can live. But men are not going to work and live as bachelors to oblige other people. We do not want laborers merely, we want decent families of men and women and children, and if the economic situation in this country cannot provide us with these, so much the worse for the situation and for the whole country. The fact is that the Jamaica peasant, if he has been decently fed and is free from disease, is a good worker. Our Government, therefore, if it is to justify any claim to being intelligent, progressive and far seeing must take up the question of disease with a degree of thoroughness never shown before; while the employer of labor must provide decent living places for his workers and pay a sufficient wage to enable them to eat enough nutritious food and become better workers and improved human beings. Unless something of the sort is done, Jamaica will continue to lose her best able bodied population. There can be no restriction of emigration here unless the Government fixes that minimum at an amount not less than two shillings a day (48 cents) and then the Government would have to see that the worker got his money, and also obtained sufficient work to do. Nothing is to be expected from any scheme of local indenture: the laborer who indentured himself to work for a year at one shilling and sixpence a day, (36 cents) even with a bonus of less than a shilling a week thrown in at the end of a year would be an exceptional person, a man with no intention of keeping the contract and what would you do if he did not keep the contract? No; these schemes are merely moonshine: we might as well dismiss them from our minds at once. The only way in which the Government can directly help the laborer is for the Government to start industries and pay a decent daily or weekly wage. But the intelligent employer can do a great deal to help himself where labor is concerned, if he will but understand that better pay and better conditions are

what his workers want and must have ; and he will find that so long as his undertakings pay him well—that so long as sugar, coconuts and other things bring him a large profit (as they are doing today) it will be profitable to him to make the lot of the worker a better one than it is. Now is the time for employers to set to work on these necessary reforms. They can afford to do so, and they decidedly ought to do so.

E. ETHELRED BROWN.